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SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [UNSC](#) [KPAL](#) [IS](#) [SY](#) [LE](#)

SUBJECT: SAUDI INFORMATION MINISTER ON LEBANESE ELECTIONS

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR LISA CARLE,
reasons 1.4 (b) & (d)

1. KEY POINTS:

--(C) Former Saudi Ambassador to Lebanon continues to be actively involved in attempts to orchestrate a victory for the March 14 alliance, and paid an under-the-radar visit in mid-April to mediate between the constantly bickering allies.
--(C) The Saudis are alarmed by the possibility of a victory by Hizballah and its March 8 alliance, which Khoja declared would represent a win for Iran in the region, and extinguish "the soul of Lebanon."

--(C) Though Bashar Al-Asad assured King Abdallah that the Syrians would not interfere in the Lebanese elections, they were in fact doing all they could to support Aoun and Hizballah, so waiting until after the elections to engage on the Israeli/Syria track would be wise.

2. (C) SAUDIS SUPPORT MARCH 14: NEA DAS David Hale met for over an hour with Saudi Minister of Information & Culture Abdalaziz Khoja on May 6, 2009. Khoja, who until March had been Saudi Ambassador to Lebanon, opened the meeting by welcoming the opportunity to discuss the upcoming Lebanese election. He shared that he had visited Beirut two weeks earlier to give the March 14 forces a boost. He characterized his visit as "contentious" but he believed his efforts had helped reconsolidate the coalition. Jumblatt remained problematic and unpredictable. Khoja confided that Jumblatt had proposed a symbolic meeting with Hassan Nasrallah and Nabi Berri, to show Druze-Shia solidarity. "We told him no! I got there just in time to stop him. We made very clear that we cannot accept any links to Nasrallah." Lebanese President Michel Sleiman needed to work harder; "he is scared," Khoja opined, "because Sulayman Frangieh threatened him." Khoja assessed that while Sleiman could be difficult, he was a "good man." The Saudis had helped him become President, and continued to support him, but "we want him to be stronger."

3. (C) MARCH 8 WIN A CALAMITY: The election would be very close, Khoja predicted, with a margin of 3-4 seats for the winning side. The possibility that the March 8 forces might win was alarming. This would be very bad, not only for Lebanon, but for the whole region. Iran's grip would be on the flag of Lebanon, on Hamas, and on the whole region. Frankly, Khoja said, if this happens, the soul of Lebanon would disappear; there will be no Lebanon any more. The Christians will leave Lebanon to the extremists: Hizballah in the south and Al Qaeda in the north. "I am very worried," Khoja concluded, adding that he was considering a return trip. It was good that senior U.S. officials such as Hale were visiting, he said, since Saad Hariri needed constant reassurance and encouragement.

4. (C) PLAN B: Khoja agreed that it would be important to coordinate in the event of a March 8 victory, saying that the Saudis had several scenarios for dealing with such a contingency, but believed it was still premature to discuss this. "We should concentrate on victory, but not forget that we might not win."

5. (C) SYRIA: DAS Hale briefed Khoja on A/S Feltman's goals for his meetings with Syrian officials in Damascus, including reinforcing U.S. insistence that Syria not interfere in the Lebanese elections. Khoja replied that King Abdallah had

told Asad the same thing. "Asad said ok, we won't interfere, but they are there and supporting Aoun and Hizballah." Hale explained that Special Envoy Mitchell had a mandate to work on the Israeli/Syrian track, but that he would wait until after the Lebanese elections, given the effect this might have in Lebanon. Khoja agreed this would be wise, and urged the U.S. to think about securing the return of Shaba Farms to Lebanon. This would disarm Hizballah, he opined. Hale replied that former Secretary Rice had raised this with the Israelis several times to no avail. There was a possibility of persuading the Israelis to withdraw from the village of Ghajjar in connection with implementation of UNSCR 1701, which would create a good climate. Khoja agreed. "Small steps would be good, and Shaba should be next."

16. (U) DAS Hale cleared this cable.

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